

Conveying Literature in the Museum: The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre

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Literaturmuseen stehen einer besonderen Herausforderung gegenüber, da Charaktere und Geschichten erst im Kopf der Leserinnen und Leser lebendig werden. Wie kann man also Literatur ausstellen – jenseits von Schaukästen mit verstaubten Originalausgaben? Nora Hawich (Berlin) hat das Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre in Great Missenden, England, als Beispiel für ein gelungenes Literaturmuseumskonzept ausgewählt. Sie beschreibt in ihrem Artikel das Museum, sein Anliegen und die vielseitigen interaktiven Stationen, die Besucher erkunden können.

Museum concepts and practices are the consequence of various processes and have changed significantly since the late 1980s. Acknowledging the museum as part of the service sector as well as its educational and social importance for the public influenced and shaped literature museums just as much as the traditional forms, perhaps even more. Often ignored in favour of the “more” visual arts, science, and history museums, literary museums face several challenges in legitimising their exhibitions. Experts in the field of museum studies describe the literature museum as a special case due to the problems of visualising something as abstract as literature. The reason for the attribute “problematic” is based on the assumption that literature museums can only rely on literary texts, for example books or manuscripts, as exhibition objects. However, trends in museum practice such



Looking into Roald Dahl's original writing hut

as the use of different modes of representation besides the “authentic” object have helped literature museums to handle perceived disadvantages, particularly, the problem of visibility.

As museums are on the path of becoming essentially about ideas and not objects¹, new literature museums present themselves as centres of communication, interpretation and discus-

sion. Lothar Jordan, President of the International Committee for Literary Museums (ICLM), explains that “the literary museum will always be a more problematic genre than the art museum”, though, “[f]resh new concepts are being developed that emphasize presentation, make the most of multimedia technology and integrate other art forms, and visitors are often left to

draw their own conclusions.”² Fitting Jordan's description extremely well, the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre is one example of this ongoing progress within the field of literary museums.

“It smells like chocolate!” “Did you see the mouse in the jar?” “Ew is that his hipbone?” “Look, there is an airplane!” Exclamations like these are no rarity in the colourful museum situated at the High Street of Great Missenden, a village in England where for over 35 years some of the most famous children's stories of the United Kingdom were written. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda* and *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* are just a selection of the books emerging from Great Missenden. Their author, Roald Dahl (1916-1990), loved the village that lies within a 45-minute distance from London and often drew inspiration for his stories from it. The small, colourful museum on the High

Street was established in his honour and opened in 2005. The Roald Dahl Museum is a charity. The idea for the museum developed after Roald Dahl's death when his wife Felicity Dahl tried to find a place for the author's archive to be kept together. Since Dahl was intent on promoting the love of reading to children, the museum aims at encouraging children between 6 and 12,

along with their families, to discover the joy of literature. This way, the museum hopes to continue Dahl's achievements of making children fall in love with books.

A Lesson from Literature: Telling Stories in the Museum

Museums fulfil a vital role in extracurricular and individual learning concepts. As one of the most important public learning institutions nowadays, museums aspire to offer an educational experience to a more and more diversified audience. Accordingly, many museums have been refurbished in the last ten years, opening new exhibitions that embrace modern education concepts in order to connect with the public. Museums now aim at sharing as well as discussing knowledge, relating their information material on display with the personal lives of their visitors. In order to achieve that, they engage in a communicative act that has been familiar to humans since the earliest of times: storytelling.

The telling of stories is a natural part of day-to-day communication. Research suggests that telling stories with and in exhibitions enhances the experience of the museum visit, making it one of the most useful education models in the museum context. Museums establish stories around their objects or information and use narrative structures in order to guide audiences and to kick-start their imagination. As curators and educators provide storylines by developing exhibitions, audiences connect the presented stories to their socio-cultural knowledge as well as their own life. As a result, the concept of storytelling in museums, although already employed in earlier times, experiences a new popularity. By providing information and memory cues that can be connected to personal life stories and experiences, museums offer narratives that help the visitors to understand contexts and processes. Furthermore, by creating exhibitions that encourage individual paths, audiences can direct their own museum experience and influence the story of the visit according to their personal interests.

Visualising Literature in the Museum

So how do you visualise literature? Creativity is a key word and one that characterises the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre. As a children's museum, it aims at stimulating the imagination of its small visitors right away. In order to help this process along, the museum design tries to recreate the atmosphere of the books. The front of the house depicts one of Roald Dahl's most famous characters, the BFG – also known as the Big Friendly Giant – on a light blue background. The courtyard invites people in through customised gates that Warner Brother's made for the museum after shooting the recent

tured around three galleries, with the first two rooms, *Boy* and *Solo*, focussing on Roald Dahl's life and the third, the *Story Centre*, dealing with his work as a writer. The *Boy* and *Solo* Gallery owe their names to two autobiographies by Roald Dahl. The *Boy* Gallery is about his early life in Wales, his family and his adolescence in boarding schools. In order to connect the life of the visitors with the life of a young man living in Britain shortly before the Second World War, the walls of the *Boy* Gallery are filled with little short stories extracted from Dahl's autobiography. Accompanied by big comics or enlarged photos, these stories talk about Dahl's experiences as a big brother, practising his target skills



Inside Roald Dahl's Writing Hut, Solo Gallery

version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. And inside the museum corridor, visitors find the enormous crocodile, another character of Roald Dahl's. Even though the museum is traditional in layout – the estate comprises of three galleries, a project room, a lunchroom, a museum shop, a courtyard, a café and office rooms – a creative exhibition set up can be found throughout all the galleries. This is an important feature, as the museum wants to foster creativity in their visitors; and the exhibition design is a tool for doing so. In addition, it is also one of many narrative devices the museum employs to visualise Roald Dahl's life and literature.

The Roald Dahl Museum is struc-

on his little sisters, or they are about his preferred teacher at boarding school. One favourite amongst young visitors is "The Great Mouse Plot," a prank in which the young Roald Dahl put a dead mouse in a candy jar of the candy shop owner Mrs. Pratchett. Further gadgets, like a real candy jar, including a mouse, standing in the glass display beneath the story, encourage the children to actually read the story written on the wall. Also, the *Boy* Gallery hopes to connect with its audience by displaying letters of Roald Dahl to his mother, photos of his home and old school records. The latter, in particular, triggers recognition and a sharing of experiences as most visitors are familiar with school records



Looking in the Mr Twit Mirror



Teamwork at the Ideas Table

and compare their results with those on display. Consequently, by telling stories about Dahl's pranks or school experiences, the museum encourages self-reflection and informs about similarities as well as differences in school between the 1920s, 1930s and today.

A similar concept is used in the second gallery of the museum, *Solo*, which deals with the circumstances that led to Dahl becoming an author after he left school. At the centre of the gallery, visitors can peak into Dahl's original writing hut – the place where he wrote almost all of his children's books. The newest addition to the museum, the shed that used to stand in Dahl's backyard in Great Missenden, gives an insight into Dahl's working schedule and system. A small book describes each item kept in the shed and its significance for Dahl. For example, Dahl's love for chocolate is explained, giving at once a clue about the origins of his book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and a prompt for identification. There is also the possibility of experiencing Roald Dahl's nest as there is a replica

of the writing hut in the *Story Centre*, enabling each visitor to sit in a writing chair that is a replication of Roald Dahl's original one.

Installations and Interactive Exhibits

The children's museum communicates with its audiences via various channels such as audio- and video installations. In the *Solo* Gallery, for instance, visitors can listen to an audio recording of Dahl's daughter Ophelia Dahl talking about her father's time in the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the severe injuries he obtained after crashing his plane in the African desert. Visitors can also watch an interview with Quentin Blake, the long-time illustrator for almost all of Roald Dahl's books, about their work relationship. In order to provide a first-hand experience, a DIY-station has been installed where one can re-enact the relationship between illustrator and writer by taking up the role of Roald Dahl, describing character ideas to the person imitating Quentin Blake, who then tries to draw those ideas on a piece of paper.

Involving the audience into various fun-activities is, in fact, an important aspect of the museum's concept since active participation increases the visitors' attention span and enthusiasm. This proves to be particularly effective for children as they learn whilst having fun. Several other activities can be found in all the galleries, such as the fresco on the wall of *Solo* illustrating the different heights of characters in Roald Dahl's books. Here visitors can compare their own height to the fictional protagonists as well as to Dahl himself. Furthermore, there is a replica of a cockpit of the Gladiator airplane that Dahl used to fly during his time in the RAF. With the help of an interactive dashboard children can find out more about Dahl's time as a fighter pilot during the Second World War. In fact, being a pilot for the RAF inspired Roald Dahl's first children's book, a story about small creatures living in aircrafts, called the Gremlins. It is by introducing such fun-facts about characters or providing background information for the stories that the museum inspires children to

read and re-read Roald Dahl's books.

**Learning in the Museum:
Get Excited and Have Fun!**

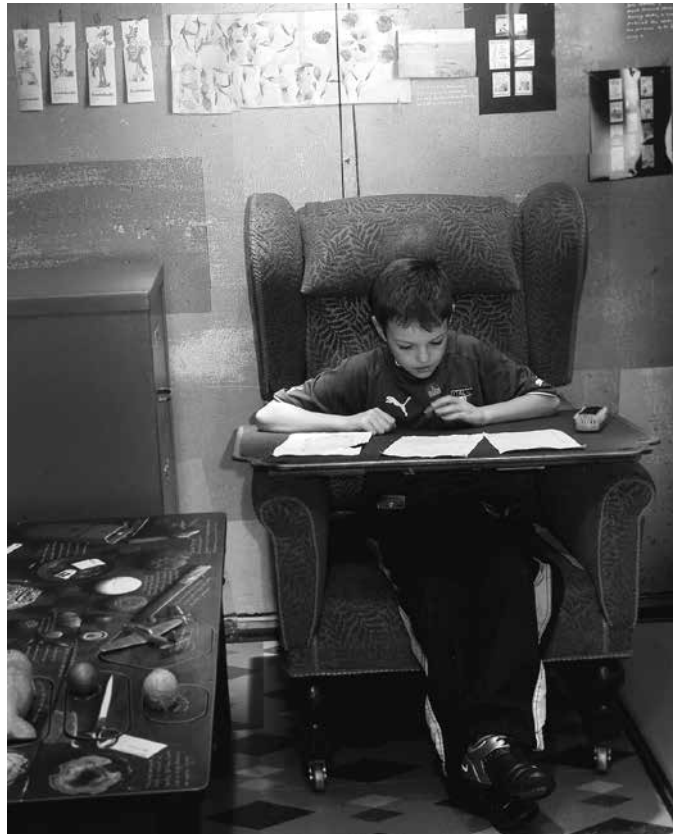
The Roald Dahl Museum employs concepts that demand a high degree of activity and involvement. Moreover, it wants its visitors to become discoverers. Instead of giving lectures and detailed text descriptions, the children are trusted to move around the exhibition space, to enter into a dialogue with the exhibits, and to find their own answers. The museum sends them on self-guided exploration tours which, on the one hand, motivate them to make connections to their own life and draw personal conclusions. On the other hand, even though the active involvement educates the children, it comes across as entertainment, mostly because characteristics of classical school education are missing. This is one reason why museums are often described as preferred out-of-school institutions and with the Roald Dahl Museum this is certainly true. Placing the focus on having fun whilst learning proves that education can be enjoyable and exciting.

Curiosity and activity are equally defining characteristics of the museum's exhibition.

Even more importantly, they are effective learning tools. Curiosity in the museum means curiosity for experimenting, by touching, smelling, and trying out things. The interactive stations provide facts that are acquired in a playful manner by pressing buttons, pulling drawers or taking a peak in peepholes. This, in addition with the whimsical design and set up of the museum, helps to excite the children, while chocolate smells and audio recording intensify the experience.

Besides amusing and fascinating the children, the visual and colourful designs also fulfil a guiding role. By providing pathways and hints, the set up of the exhibition space leads the visitors to certain objects and information.

As a place for children the Roald Dahl Museum has to present some guidance, in order to make sure every child gets the best out of their visit. This does not mean all the activities have to be completed. Each child is free to choose whether they want to take part in a certain activity or not; yet, it is about pointing out what there is to be seen and what can be done in the museum.



Trying out Roald Dahl's writing chair

**The Making of Future Writers:
Encouraging Literacy and Creativity
in Children**

"To inspire in everyone a love of stories and creativity, particularly creative writing, through the Roald Dahl Archive, his story and life,"³ is the stated mission of the Roald Dahl Museum. Consequently, its goal is to motivate each person entering the galleries to explore their artistic side in one way or another. In order to ensure this mission, the museum included spaces for creativity in their concept. As outlined, the *Boy* and *Solo* galleries provide many opportunities to become active and involved through dressing up, pulling drawers, or painting imaginative characters. Craft workshops take place almost

every other weekend and teach the children crafting skills. In addition, annual events like the *Roald Dahl Day* are opportunities for involvement and interactivity. Yet, the place in the museum that is truly aimed at being a catalyst for creativity is the *Story Centre*.

Every child receives a Story Ideas Book and a pencil when entering the museum so they can take notes whenever something funny, weird or interesting comes to their mind. Roald Dahl owned several notebooks in his life where he kept all his ideas until they were put into a story. The children are encouraged to use the book as much as they can throughout the exhibition and even thereafter. Especially the *Story Centre* provides ample opportunities to use the little book. Due to the fact that the activities presented in the Centre match the content of the Story Ideas Book, every revelation sparked by an activity can be marked down. For instance, at the *Ideas Table* each visitor can take specially made newspaper clippings of facial features and decide which of these their character should have. The clippings are printed on adhesive paper that sticks to the paper in the notebook once it has been licked.

In addition, the book encourages its holder to think of a funny name and "interesting facts" about the character by giving an example and explaining that Roald Dahl did the same when coming up with a story. Another supply of character traits that might suit a hero or heroine is the dress up area to the left of the *Ideas Table*. Here the writers find different costumes that they can try on in order to picture what styles would fit his or her character best, or they can just simply act out whatever is on their mind.

Besides character building, children are asked to experiment with language by coming up with their own words

and illustrating them with pictures in the notebook. Furthermore, words that stick to magnetic boards resembling refrigerator doors can be arranged to create verses that rhyme, or attributes describing “goodies” and “baddies” can be shuffled around. At another desk, films can be made. The station provides the storyteller with toy figures that have to be set in scene before taking several pictures of them. In the end, the different photographs are shown in sequence, creating a stop-motion film. The film-making demonstrates that stories have to develop. They require actions, dramatic tension and a climax. By filming different scenes that are meant to tell a story and then watching them, the visitors realise whether or not their plot works. The method is a creative way of teaching story development. The *Story Centre* gives visitors various opportunities to get involved in the creative process of writing, or at least developing, a story.

Exhibiting Literature: A Challenge

Literature is an abstract concept that happens in the mind and consequently, poses a visual challenge for museum makers and visitors alike. However, stimulating the imagination of museum guests by allowing them to experience the production of literature, instead of only approaching the perspective of the receiver, can help exhibiting it. The audience is encouraged to try out everything and decide then what works for their own writing and what does not. As such, the Roald Dahl Museum provides opportunities for self-improvement and learning; yet, it never defines literature in definite terms. Therefore, visitors are free to draw their own conclusion about Roald Dahl in particular and literature in general.

Looking Abroad

The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre is an exciting place that proves literature museums are by no means outdated or second-class to science, history or art museums. Yet, it is of course not the only literature museum this applies to. Over the last years plenty of literature houses engaged in new ways

of exhibiting literature. Some of them took roads no one had ever travelled before, like the Erich Kästner Museum (1999) in Dresden that wants to fascinate visitors with its unique exhibition about one of Germany’s most famous authors of the 20th century. The Erich Kästner Museum was designed by Ruairí O’Brien and represents the first *micromuseum*[®]. Mobile and flexible, it could be located anywhere. As it is, the museum is actually a block of separate modules that form a rectangular of the size of 2m x 3m x 1.2m when put together. In its form, it is reminiscent of a building brick. When taken apart, the block splits into 14 individual pieces. The centrepiece houses some “original” objects in a glass case and accommodates a multimedia core. The 13 surrounding pieces look like shelves with compartments and many separate trays to push and pull. The shelves have several differently coloured drawers and hold the main part of the exhibition content, information about Kästner’s life and his work. Indeed, this colour scheme is the only organisational aspect in the museum. Otherwise visitors are free to roam through whatever part of the exhibition they like. Indeed, the *micromuseum*[®] gives its audiences complete freedom to discover the author on their own.

The concept of the Erich Kästner Museum aims at providing peeks into different aspects of the author’s life story, enabling the visitors to make up their own image of who Erich Kästner was rather than presenting a coherent biography and analysis of his work. By avoiding a definite narrative of Kästner’s life and personality, the museum allows for different interpretations and active involvement. The latter is actually necessary as nothing can be found in the museum if one does not look for it.

“And above all...

watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you, because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places”.⁴ Roald Dahl wrote these lines of advice in his last book *The Minpins* and they are certainly true for the Roald Dahl Museum and Story

Centre and the Erich Kästner Museum. Hiding great secrets whether in drawers or jars, both museums employ interactive concepts that send their visitors on trails of exploration and discovery. Their predominant goal: visualising literature.

Though different in style, design and set up, the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre and the Erich Kästner Museum share fundamental similarities in the ideas behind their concepts of conveying literature. As both provide innovative ideas, each inspires new attitudes towards museums in general. Engaging audiences with concepts demanding a high degree of interactivity, the Roald Dahl Museum as well as the Erich Kästner Museum spark curiosity in their visitors’ minds. By addressing different senses and stimulating people’s inherent desire to learn, the audience, whether child or adult, turns into explorers, discovering the hidden secrets in the literature exhibitions. After all, displaying knowledge might be the function of museums, but as in the real world, it has to be uncovered first.

Notes

1. Harrison, Julia D. (2005). “Ideas of Museums in the 1990s.” Gerard Corsane (ed.). *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*. London: Routledge. 48.
2. Bausch, Mechthild (2012). “Dichter Dran! Where Words Never Fail.” *Luft-hansa Magazin* 5 (2012). 39.
3. “Our Vision and Mission.” The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, n.d. Web 29 July 2013. <http://www.roalddahlmuseum.org/aboutus/vision.aspx> (last accessed 1 October 2013).
4. Dahl, Roald (2008). *The Minpins*. London: Puffin Books. 48.

All photos: Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre

This text also appeared in Hard Times Magazine 94/2014, ed. by Gesa Stedman and Sandra van Lente.